

# Truly, Madly, Deeply: the ghostly love of Ceyx and Alcyone

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As a woman, crippled by grief, tearfully picks out a Bach tune on the piano, the sound of a cello gradually intertwines itself with her melodic line. She turns and sees a silhouette, gently bowing, a silhouette which slowly reveals itself to be, yes, incredible though it is, her dead and agonisingly mourned love.

In this central scene of the film *Truly Madly Deeply* the ghost of Jamie comes back to comfort Nina, whose grief at his loss is overwhelming. So great is her longing for him that she manages to bring him back to her. These themes of all-consuming love, all-destroying grief and the all-powerful desire which can overcome that grief occur also in one of the most poignant and moving of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the story of Ceyx and Alcyone.

## Love at the heart of the MetAMORphoses

Love, of course, is a very common theme in the poem. One of the very first stories we read is that of Apollo's unrequited passion for the nymph Daphne and that pretty much sets the tone for the poem. Gods fall for mortals, men for women, women for men, men for statues and Narcissus even falls in love with himself. In most of these stories, however, the passion is one-sided, leading to disaster and usually metamorphosis either for lover or beloved. In a few however – we might think of the devoted old peasants Baucis and Philemon or the eventual happiness of Pygmalion and his sculpture brought to life – the love is mutual. Among these we must certainly class Ceyx and Alcyone, as devoted a couple as any in the poem.

## Stormy relationships

That there is something special about the relationship between the king of Trachis and his wife is clear from the first time we meet them. When Ceyx is about to leave with a posse to hunt a monstrous wolf, Alcyone rushes out and begs him not to go. We are probably meant to think of other wives who act like this, such as Andromache, who begs Hector not to go out and fight in the *Iliad*. However, it is the words she uses which are telling, entreating him to save two lives in one. Not only does her life depend on his safety but we get a feeling that they are almost two halves of the same person, like the four-legged, four-armed people cut in half whom Aristophanes describes in Plato's *Symposium*. When she begs him again not to go on the dangerous sea voyage to the oracle at Claros, her last, despairing request is that at least they should face the terrors of the winds and waves together. Separated by sea, storm and even death they may be, but we already start to get a feeling that these two are destined to be united forever.

Of course, Alcyone is quite right to be afraid. Ceyx is caught up in an enormous storm, in depiction of which Ovid typically tries to outdo all the earlier epic storms described by Homer, Virgil and others. As the king clings to a plank instead of a sceptre, his last thoughts, his last words are Alcyone. Her name is all that is left to him as he tries to conjure up her presence before his drowning eyes. He wishes that she were there but at the same time is glad that she is safe and far away. And so, murmuring his beloved's name, he dies.

For all her foreboding about the voyage, Alcyone, of course, does not actually know that her husband is dead and faithfully continues to offer sacrifices to Juno for his safe return. This is embarrassing to the queen of the gods and she is uncomfortable with the contamination of death and mourning on her altars. As so often, the triviality and pettiness of the gods is set in sharp relief against the far deeper emotions of human beings. And so, Juno sends her usual messenger, Iris, goddess of the rainbow, to summon a dream that will break the tragic news to Alcyone.

## Nightmare apparitions

Iris' mission takes her to the house of Somnus, the god of sleep. This is one of Ovid's cleverest, most ingenious and most artfully crafted passages, in which he imagines a place where everything is quiet, everything drowsy. His description is mainly in terms of what *isn't* there – no cockerel, no watchdog, no noisy hinges – and the only plants which grow are poppies and other sleep-inducing herbs. Sleep himself can barely stay awake to answer the commands of the brisk, efficient Iris. Nevertheless, he manages to fulfil her orders and sends one of his sons, Morpheus, to impersonate Ceyx and tell Alcyone of his death.

Let us take a moment away from the story to think a little about what is going on and what the poet is doing here. This rather comical, or at least clever scene seems odd in the middle of an otherwise moving and tragic story. Why does Ovid put it here? We can never know of course what the man himself intended, so perhaps a better question is what effect the scene has on us as readers. Sometimes a rather lighter moment can break the chain of unrelieved tragedy and stop our being desensitised. By relaxing for a moment and smiling at the witty personification of Sleep, we are better prepared to feel the sadness, the pathos of Alcyone's grief in the next scene. Yet should we dismiss this episode as merely light relief? Ovid's skill as a poet suggests we should look for something more here.

Morpheus' talent is for impersonation. While his brother Icelos is skilled in imitating animals and Phantasos takes on the form of inanimate objects, he appears in dreams in the rôle of human beings. All three are clearly actors performing as if on a stage, and this is one of the metaphors which Ovid uses here and elsewhere. However, as critics have recently shown, Morpheus is also doing what the poet does, impersonating people. Ovid was educated, like all elite Romans, in rhetoric and the art of declamation. One of the exercises in which he excelled (so Seneca tells us) was the *suasoria*, in which he would take on the rôle of a historical or mythical character and deliberate, for example, whether as Caesar he should cross the Rubicon or as Agamemnon he should sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia. It is very likely that such exercises developed his skill for characterisation and especially the speeches where he has to take on the voice of a mythical character. This, of course, is exactly what Morpheus does in our story. He is therefore what we call a metapoetic figure, a character in a poem who tells us something about *how* poetry is written.

So Morpheus appears as Ceyx to the sleeping Alcyone. Cunningly he plays up how much changed he must look in death if she doesn't recognise him – of course she doesn't recognise

him; it isn't him! He urges her to mourn and mourn she does. She embraces the empty air, looks at the empty place where he stood. Just as the name was all the drowning Ceyx had of Alcyone, so this ghost, this false ghost, which her longing (and Juno's intervention) has conjured, is all that Alcyone has of Ceyx.

As in *Truly Madly Deeply*, the ghost of the beloved comes back to help the woman left behind cope with her loss. Yet there is a difference. In the film, Nina slowly comes to realise that, much as she still loves Jamie, she has to say goodbye. In an unbearably moving scene, they recite together the poem *La Muerta* by Pablo Neruda in which a man tells his lover that, if she dies, he will always love her but that he must go on living. Jamie's return enables Nina to work through her grief, say goodbye and go on living. Alcyone cannot. As we have seen, she and Ceyx are virtually two halves of the same person. When the ghost vanishes, she denies her own existence – Alcyone is nothing, nothing; she died with her Ceyx. Rather than being separated by it, these two must be united in death.

### **Taking the final plunge**

This being Ovid, it doesn't happen in an obvious way. As she goes down to the shore to where she had seen Ceyx off on his journey – places can have strong associations – she notices something far off in the water. Just as Ceyx had gradually sailed out of sight till all she could see was the top of his mast, so now the process is reversed as the object moves closer and she recognises it first as a corpse, then slowly as her husband. Her attempted suicide by jumping off a pier is, however, thwarted. As she falls, she suddenly begins to fly; the kisses she gives his corpse are cold, cold because he is dead but also because her lips have turned into a beak as she metamorphoses into a kingfisher, a halcyon in Greek. So far, so familiar, but next we have something extremely unusual as the dead Ceyx is also transformed into a kingfisher. The two together share their enduring love and nest on the waves during the calm 'halcyon days' which the gods grant, in contrast to the storm which killed Ceyx in the first place.

How then are we to read this final twist in the story? On one level, like many of the poem's metamorphoses, it is an aetiology, an explanation of the origins of things. Thus the devoted kingfishers were originally a devoted husband and wife. That the transformation occurs when Alcyone is dying and Ceyx already dead might suggest that it is a metaphor for death, that their enduring love can only endure when they are reunited beyond this life. Certainly there is emphasis on not only their reunion but their union, that move towards oneness which we have sensed throughout the story. Alcyone may have died when Ceyx died, but Ceyx transformed becomes a halcyon; they are united in name as in love and in death. These at least are a few ways of reading the story but as with all literature and perhaps especially with Ovid, it is our personal response to the poem in all its beauty, pathos, wit and complexity which is the important thing.

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